



Private Vernon Earle (Number 430739) of the 27th Battalion (City of Winnipeg), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Lijssenhoek Military Cemetery: Grave reference VIII.C.19A..

(Right: The image of the 27th Battalion (City of Winnipeg) shoulder-patch is from the Wikipedia web-site.)

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His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a telegraphist, Vernon Earle had left the Dominion of Newfoundland at a young age, the 1901 Census showing *him* – then at the age of sixteen - his parents and three of his four siblings, resident by that time of Canso East in the Nova Scotian county of Guysborough.

However, there appears to be little further information of his subsequent move from Canso to the province of British Columbia. All that may be asserted with any certainty is that he was living, at least temporarily, in or about the provincial capital of Victoria in March of 1915 – also likely two months prior to that and also at *Willows Camp* (see below) – for that is where he both enlisted and then attested for the duration of the war.

His first pay records show that it was on January 12, 1915, that the Canadian Army first began to remunerate him for his services. They also show that it was on the same day that Vernon Earle was *taken on strength* by the 88th Regiment (*Victoria Fusiliers*) of the Canadian Militia*. But because it was a Militia unit he was then later obliged to attest into one of the newly-forming Overseas Battalions.

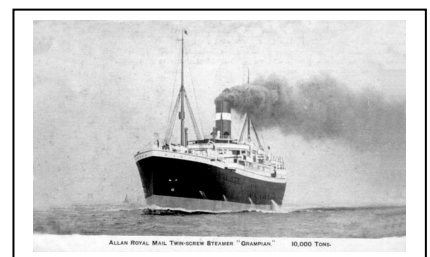
**The Canadian Militia, whose reason for being was solely the defence of Canada, was by law forbidden to undertake any military activities outside the borders of the country. However, Overseas Battalions were by this time being mobilized and the Militia was to recruit on behalf of them. In fact the majority of the first waves of recruits were men who transferred from Militia formations.*

The parent unit of the 88th Regiment itself was obliged to undergo a bureaucratic transformation from which emerged the 88th Overseas Battalion.

Thus it was on March 18, 1915, that Private Earle of the 88th Regiment (*Victoria Fusiliers*) underwent a medical examination which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*. He thereupon attested and was transferred to the 48th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*British Columbia*). On the same day, the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion by the Commanding Officer of the 48th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel W.J.H. Holmes, when he declared – on paper – that...*Vernon Earle...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

This final flurry of bureaucratic activity had taken place at *Willows Camp* at the *Victoria Exhibition Grounds* and it was here that Private Earle's training was to proceed until the month of June when his 48th Battalion was transported across the country by train to take ship in the port of Montréal.

It was on board His Majesty's Transport *Grampian* that the 48th Battalion was to take passage to the United Kingdom from Montréal, and it embarked on the final day of June, 1915. Private Earle and his unit, however, were not to travel alone: also on board were the 1st Drafts of the 44th and 45th Battalions and also the entire 43rd Battalion, all of Canadian Infantry, as well as the Yukon Machine-Gun Detachment.



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(Preceding page: *The image of the requisitioned Allan Line steamer Grampian is from the Old Ship Photo Galleries web-site.*)

Grampian sailed on July 1 of 1915 and ten days later docked in the English south-coast naval facility of Portsmouth-Devonport whereupon the 48th Battalion was transported by train to the large Canadian military complex of *Shornecliffe*, in close proximity to the English Channel harbour and town of Folkestone.



(Right above: *The harbour of Plymouth-Devonport as it was almost a century after the Great War – a lot less busy nowadays - photograph from 2013*)

Shornecliffe was a busy place during this period as the multiple units of the 2nd Canadian Division were stationed there and were preparing for their transfer to *active service* on the Continent in two months' time. And apparently some of the infantry battalions were in need of complementary personnel to fill their ranks before departure: Private Earle was chosen to be one of them.



(Right above: *Little remains of Shornecliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)

On September 10 he was one of sixty *other ranks* to be transferred from the 48th Battalion, then to be *taken on strength* by the 27th Battalion (*City of Winnipeg*) billeted in the subsidiary camp at *Otterpool*, but soon to be en route to the Continent. Two days later again, Private Earle was attached to the unit's "C" Company.

In mid-September the 2nd Canadian Division sailed from England to France. For the most part, the units travelled via nearby Folkestone and its French counterpart, Boulogne, although some of the heavier equipment and transport was moved through Southampton and Le Havre. In the case of the 27th Battalion, the crossing was undertaken on the night of September 17-18, the unit arriving in France at twenty minutes to three in the morning.



(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the top of the white cliffs of nearby Dover – photograph from 2009*)

As of that time, Private Earle was on *active service*.

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The personnel of the parent unit of the 27th Battalion (*City of Winnipeg*) had sailed from Canada – from Québec – on May 15 of 1915, two months after Vernon Earle’s enlistment. The ship on which it had travelled, *Carpathia*, had docked, also in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport, on May 28 and, on the day following, the Battalion had been transported to one of the camps – perhaps the aforesaid *Otterbury* - at *Shorncliffe*.

(Right below: *An image of the French port of Boulogne where the 27th Battalion was to land - at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

Stationed at *Shorncliffe* until the middle of September of 1915, the unit had then sailed from Folkestone on the 17th of that month and, as already seen, had disembarked in Boulogne at two-forty in the morning of the 18th. From there Private Earle’s new Battalion to be transported by train north to a station somewhat near to a camp in the vicinity of the commune of St-Sylvestre, close to the Franco-Belgian border.



The remainder of the transfer, a further ten kilometres, was to be made on foot.

(Right above: *Troops – in this case likely British – on the move either in or towards Belgium in the early days of the Great War. Canadian units – apart from distinguishing badges and flashes – wore the same uniforms and, apart from their rifles and machine-guns (both later to be replaced) – had much the same equipment. – from a vintage post-card*)

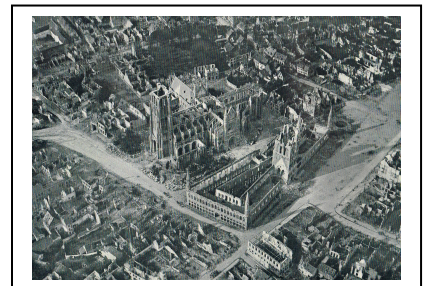


At this period of the *Great War*, the Canadian troops arriving in France were being despatched immediately upon arrival towards the areas of the Franco-Belgian frontier, in and about the *Ploegsteert Sector* where was also stationed at that time the 1st Canadian Division.



(Right: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines and also in the Ploegsteert Sector, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the centre – photograph from 2014*)

At one time or another, *all* units of the – eventual – four Canadian Divisions were to be stationed in Belgium, either in the *Ypres Salient*, a region which was to prove to be one of the most lethal theatres of the entire Great War, or in the sectors leading south from there to the frontier with France. The latter was to be the case with Private Earle’s 27th Battalion.



(Right above: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle - which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)

The 27th Battalion was a component of the Canadian 6th Infantry Brigade, which itself was an element of the Canadian 2nd Division, newly-formed in that September of 1915 and posted to the area of St-Éloi, south of the battered city of Ypres.

The (1st) Canadian Division had been in the *Ypres Salient* since February of 1915 and had distinguished itself in that April during the *2nd Battle of Ypres*. However, this particular confrontation had taken place some months before the arrival of the 2nd Division which now had to settle down to the business of the daily routines and rigours of trench warfare*.

**During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.*



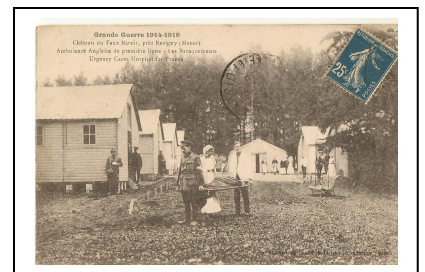
Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

There were other duties assigned at times to individuals and on December 30 of 1915, Private Earle was ordered to attend a course at the 6th Brigade Machine-Gun School. However, there is no information among his files as to what the exercise may have entailed, only that he returned to service with his 27th Battalion on February 22, some eight weeks later.

It was to be almost seven months after its disembarkation in France before the 2nd Division – and thus the 27th Battalion - was plunged into its first major conflagration. That is not to say that there had not been a steady number of casualties – the majority due to enemy artillery and to snipers.

At least one casualty during that interim, however, had not been caused by enemy action: Private Earle had caught influenza during the month of February and, on the 18th of that month had been admitted into the 4th Canadian Field Ambulance in the vicinity of the community of Westoutre. One of seventeen *other ranks* to report sick on that day, he was then one of four to be forwarded from there on February 20 to the Rest Station run by the same Field Ambulance.



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(Preceding page: *A British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some – from a vintage post-card*)

Three days later he was on the move again, on this occasion to the Divisional Rest Station from where, on February 27-28, he returned *to duty* with his unit.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* officially took place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was here that the British had excavated a series of galleries under the German lines, there to place a series of explosives which they detonated on that March 27. It was followed by an infantry assault.

After an initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the by-then exhausted British troops. They had enjoyed no more success than had their British comrades-in-arms, and by the 17th of that April, when the battle was called off, the Germans were back where they had been some three weeks previously.



(Below right: *A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – from Illustration*)

Ironically, it was the success of the explosions which had been the principal cause of the failure of the British-Canadian venture. The weather at the time had been vile and it had rained a great deal of the time. The craters created by the detonations had filled with water and become impassable; the explosions had also rendered the landscape unrecognizable and the few viable paths and tracks impassable. The troops had fought for days standing in water up to the knees – at times up to the waist – and had gone nowhere.

It was on April 3 that the 27th Battalion had been ordered forward... *to take over trenches in front of St. Éloi*. By the 7th when the unit was relieved by the 21st Canadian Infantry Battalion, it had incurred two-hundred thirty *killed, wounded and missing in action*. Many of the unit's losses had been due to the German artillery fire which had grown ever heavier as the days passed.

During the fighting at the *St-Éloi Craters* the casualty count of the 2nd Canadian Division was to be in total some fifteen hundred all told. And as quite often happened during the *Great War*, it was all for very, very little.

Thus it was back to the daily drudgery of trench warfare. Some seven weeks of that uncomfortable and at times precarious life in and out of the trenches were then to pass before the enemy made a further serious attempt to break the deadlock at Ypres.

(Right: *Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)



From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of the village of *Hooge, of Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts and Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps.

The Canadians had apparently been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they never exploited.

(Right below: The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-west of the city of Ypres (today Ieper) whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance – photograph from 1914)

The Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground. However, badly organized, the operation was a dismal failure, many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.



On the day of the German attack the 27th Battalion had been in Reserve at *B Camp* and recovering from the exertions of the day's baseball and football games – and from the band concert - of the previous day.

(Right: Maple Copse Cemetery, adjacent to Hill 60, in which lie many Canadians killed during the days of the confrontation at Mount Sorrel – photograph from 2014)

It was not until June 6 that the unit was ordered forward, at first into Ypres before being divided to undertake various tasks, one of which was to take defensive positions to oppose another German assault launched that day.



On the 7th and 8th the 27th Battalion was in support; from the 9th until one o'clock in the morning of the 12th, it was in the forward trenches before having been ordered back once more into support positions. On the evening of that same day, other units moved up into assembly positions to deliver a massive counter-attack – on this occasion better-organized and also well-supported by the Canadian guns – early on the following morning.



(Right above: Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) today contains twenty-four hundred fifty-nine burials and commemorations. – photograph from 2014)

(Right: A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature – photograph from 2014)



The counter-stroke was successful. After the previous eleven days of at times ferocious fighting, apart from a small Canadian loss to the Germans of ground in the area of *Hooge*, the two opposing forces now found themselves having returned much to their original positions of June 2. And there the matter drew to a close: status quo.

Thus it was again back to that trench warfare routine for some two further months after which the 27th Battalion – in the company of most of the Canadian Corps’ other battalions – was once more withdrawn, on this occasion for intensive training in ‘*open warfare*’ in areas that had been prepared for them in the north-west of France. The Canadians were about to travel from there further south into France to play a role in the British summer offensive of 1916.

But not Private Earle.

The 27th Battalion (*City of Winnipeg*) War Diary entry for July 12, 1916, reads as follows: *Battalion in the line. Wind S. Westerly. Weather cloudy & rain. Day quiet. Operation again postponed as wind not favourable.*

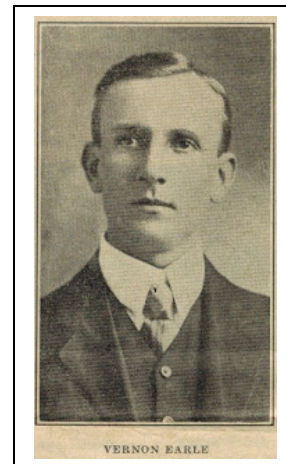
There is no mention of casualties.

Casualty report: “*Died of Wounds*” – *While on duty with a ration party on July 12th 1916, he was severely wounded in the stomach by an enemy machine gun bullet. He was immediately attended to, and evacuated to No. 3 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station where he succumbed to his injuries two days later.*

His passing was reported by the Commanding Officer of the 3rd Canadian C.C.S. at the *Rémy Sidings* near the Belgian town of Poperinghe. It had been the single death of that July 14, 1916, at the Clearing Station.

The son of Edmund Paige Earle, telegraphist, and of Louise Clarke Earle (née *Hadley*) – of Heart’s Content, Newfoundland, and later of Canso East, Nova Scotia, he was also brother to Archibald-Blackader, to Gwendoline, Hartley and Abbie.

Vernon Earle had enlisted at the *apparent* age of thirty years and six months: date of birth at Heart’s Content, Newfoundland, June 20, 1885 (from attestation papers and parish records).



(Right above: The photograph of Vernon Earle is from the web-site *First world war veterans of Guysborough county*.)

Private Vernon Earle was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 25, 2023.